

Designing and Implementing Social Emotional Learning Programs to Promote Equity

February 4, 2022



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How to cite this paper: Gagnier, K. M., Okawa, A., and Jones-Manson, S. (2022). Designing and Implementing Social Emotional Learning Programs to Promote Equity. White paper produced by AnLar and the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education; Education, Innovation, and Research Program (EIR).

The contents of this document were developed under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education through the Office of Innovation and Early Learning Programs (IELP) within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), by AnLar under Award # GS00F229DA. This contains resources that are provided for the reader's convenience. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of various subject matter experts as well as hypertext links, contact addresses, and websites to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, enterprise, curriculum, or program of instruction mentioned in this document is intended or should be inferred.

Summary

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs can be an effective tool for supporting the wellbeing of students, teachers, schools, and communities. As society continues to grapple with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, fostering well-being and resilience is a top priority. There is growing consensus that implementing SEL programs well by definition includes inclusive, collaborative approaches that value culture and consider context. Programs that approach SEL without an equity lens can hurt students from non-dominant cultures. Thus, an explicit and intentional focus on equity can enhance SEL programs by increasing the program's relevance, accessibility, and potential benefits for all students.

In this white paper, we illustrate how and why designing, implementing, and evaluating high-quality SEL programs with a lens of equity and inclusion is imperative to realizing the promise of SEL programs in supporting students' social, emotional, and academic well-being. The Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Program in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education has made significant investments in funding equity-focused SEL programs. We highlight five EIR-funded projects and provide resources and approaches for other researchers and practitioners who aim to develop, implement, and evaluate equity-focused SEL programs.

Introduction

As we continue to resume in-person learning after an abrupt year of remote learning, supporting students' and teachers' wellbeing is paramount. A growing body of research points to the power of social and emotional learning programs as an effective tool for supporting the wellbeing of students, teachers, schools, and communities (**Cahill and Dadvand, 2020; Schlund, Jager and Schlinger, 2020; Schonert-Reichl, 2017; Durlak et al., 2010**). Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to the "process through which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, and related skills, attitudes, behaviors, and values that help direct their thoughts, feelings, and actions in ways that

"Research illustrates that when implemented well, high-quality SEL programs support students' development in ways that improve their social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes."

enable them to succeed in school, work, and life" (**Jones et al., 2017; Ramirez et al., 2021**). Research illustrates that when implemented well, high-quality SEL programs support students' development in ways that improve their social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes (**Bierman et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2010; Diamond et al., 2007; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2011; Jones and Kahn, 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018; Raver et al., 2009; Sklad et al., 2012**). In this white paper, we illustrate how and why designing, implementing, and evaluating high-quality SEL programs with a lens of equity and inclusion is imperative to realizing the promise of SEL programs in supporting students' social, emotional, and academic well-being.

More than 90 percent of schools and districts in the U.S. report a focus on developing students' SEL skills (**Duchesneau, 2020**). There is growing consensus that implementing SEL programs well by definition includes inclusive, collaborative approaches that value culture and consider context. Each student brings to school their unique identities, strengths, values, lived experience, and culture (**Shriver and Weissberg, 2020**) which color their overall school experience (**Gay, 2014; Erickson, 2010**). Students' "societal realities (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia), individual realities (e.g., socioeconomic status, family dynamics, experiences in schools, access to opportunities), and cultural background all influence their social, emotional, and academic development" (**Duchesneau, 2020**). High-quality SEL programs involve understanding the context in which students live. They recognize, value, and elevate all students' experiences, particularly those who are currently and/or have been historically impacted by systemic inequities, or both. It takes a systemic approach to SEL to create equitable learning conditions (**Schlund et al., 2020**). This can be accomplished by integrating SEL into every aspect of the student learning experience with consistent application of inclusive approaches that are flexible enough to allow adaptation to local contexts, needs, and values (**Shriver and Weissberg, 2020**).

What can be gained by approaching social emotional learning through an equity lens?

The global COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the critical need for SEL-focused programs and interventions. It also intensified long-standing inequities in education. Students, teachers, and parents reported increased levels of stress during the pandemic. For example, when asked about obstacles to remote learning, 39 percent of students surveyed in the Spring of 2020 cited feelings

of stress, depression, or anxiety. This percentage rose to 46 percent in the Fall of 2020 (**Hesterberg et al., 2021, slide 5**). The pandemic has exacerbated academic, social, emotional, and mental health challenges that were pre-existing for many American students. This was especially true for students of color, indigenous students, English language learners, students with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ students (**Goldberg, 2021**). In a recent article, **Hesterberg et al. (2021)** explains that education needs both SEL programs and equitable educational¹ approaches. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (**CASEL**), a leading authority on SEL, recently authored a report focused on SEL's potential as a "lever" to promote educational equity² (**Schlund, Jagers, and Schlinger, 2020**). The authors champion the potential of SEL to cultivate knowledge, beliefs, practices, and relationships that promote an examination of inequitable policies and practices and create more equitable learning environments and educational experiences for diverse students, families, and educators.

Both SEL and equitable education theories and practices aim to improve opportunities, outcomes, and achievements for all students, particularly those who have been impacted by structural inequities (e.g., students of color, English language learners, low-income students, students who live in rural communities, and students with disabilities). The recent prominence and promise of SEL has led to increased interest in leveraging SEL-based interventions to promote equitable learning environments (**Ramirez et al., 2021**). Yet, **Ramirez et al. (2021)** warns that though SEL is "well-positioned" to promote equitable learning environments, SEL programs and practices do not inherently promote equity. The authors explain that leveraging SEL to promote equity requires being intentionally inclusive, relevant, accessible, and beneficial for all students, while also intentionally countering inequality and systems that hurt or hinder students impacted by structural inequalities. Programs that approach SEL without an equity lens may run the risk of hurting students from non-dominant cultures (**Duchesneau, 2020**). Thus, an explicit and intentional focus on equity can enhance SEL programs by increasing the program's relevance, accessibility, and potential benefits for all students.

"Programs that approach SEL without an equity lens may run the risk of hurting students from non-dominant cultures."

What do equitable SEL programs look like?

Equitable SEL programs are those which aim to promote students' SEL capacities and skills while advancing educational equity. They tend to engage in collaborative practices that frame diversity as an asset rather than simply an acceptance of differences. These collaborative learning experiences allow teachers and students to be actively involved in establishing inclusive norms and structures

¹ In this paper, "equitable education" refers to the provision of resources and opportunities aligned to meet the diverse needs of students and districts. Equitable education is characterized by a commitment to impact long-term, systems-level change informed through an examination of data on existing barriers to equity AND the development of policies to address those barriers through informed, collaborative partnerships with stakeholders (adapted from Federal Register, A Daily Journal of the United States Government: Final Priorities and Definitions-Secretary's Supplemental Priorities and Definitions for Discretionary Grants Programs: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/12/10/2021-26615/final-priorities-and-definitions-secretarys-supplemental-priorities-and-definitions-for>, December 17, 2021)

² In this white paper, the term "equity" means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment. (The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/25/executive-order-on-diversity-equity-inclusion-and-accessibility-in-the-federal-workforce/>; December 17, 2021)

within the learning environment. Equitable SEL programs situate behavior management within community and relationship building, rather than in punitive consequences. They incorporate multicultural and multimodal instructional materials, strategies, and content that highlight students' heritages, cultures, and experiences. SEL practitioners (educators and other adults) work to build students' self-awareness through modeling their own self-reflective practices, behaviors, and emotions; establishing warm and reciprocal relationships; making space for student agency and student voice; and quickly adapting lessons and classroom culture in ways that are supportive and culturally sustaining for students. Though there are several methods to designing equitable SEL programs, this paper highlights three examples of equitable approaches that SEL programs can utilize.

Culturally responsive approach. One highly-established equitable approach to SEL programs is engaging in *culturally responsive practices* that emphasize "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them." (Gay, 2018).

Culturally sustaining approach. There are also advocates for *culturally-sustaining* (Paris, 2012) approaches to promote equitable SEL programming. This approach support students in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while offering access to dominant cultural competence (Colorado Department of Education, n.d.).

Social-justice-oriented approach. Equitable SEL programs that use a *social-justice-oriented approach* (Ramirez et al., 2021) focus on developing students' empathy and empowering students to be agents of change to improve their local climate and culture (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002; Banks, 2004; Cammarota and Romero, 2011). This approach fosters students' social and emotional development using inclusive practices which allow everyone to participate, feel valuable and experience a sense of belonging. The social-justice-oriented approach includes teaching about activism, power and inequity in schools and society, fostering students' understanding and value of their own identities, exploring and highlighting ways we are all connected and deserving of respect, teaching students to recognize injustice and act against it, and explicitly calling out and correcting biases in SEL assessment, curricula, and programming (Dover, 2009; Ehrenhalt, 2018; Ramirez et al., 2021).

Designing equitable SEL programs is the key to ensuring that all students' needs are met, particularly those disenfranchised by systemic racism and discrimination. Recently, Hesterberg et al. (2021) reviewed literature on high-quality SEL programs that promote equity and identified six characteristics of equity-focused SEL programs. The literature review showed that high-quality, equity-focused SEL programs:

Characteristics of Equity-Focused SEL Programs

1. Support educators' capacity to integrate equity in curriculum and instruction by providing professional learning opportunities focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion.
2. Provide opportunities for adults (educators and parents) to practice and model SEL for their students.

3. Examine data and outcomes at the system, school, or student level for different groups of students to identify specific needs which can be addressed.
4. Engage students in the design of programs and practices to ensure these affirm their lived experiences.
5. Engage the broader community in the design of SEL programs to ensure community values and strengths are represented.
6. Align SEL activities, programs, and practices with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to foster coherence and sustainability.

To help districts, schools, teachers, and communities implement these six characteristics into programs, [Hesterberg et al., \(2021\)](#) synthesized the characteristics into actionable recommendations for programs and practices:

Recommendations for Equity-focused SEL Programs and Practices

1. **Engage adults in professional learning centered on diversity, equity, and inclusion.**
These professional learning experiences provide adults with critical knowledge and skills to reflect upon their own experiences with power and identity, and design and adapt curricular materials to focus on equity.
2. **Prioritize professional development centered on developing adult SEL skills.**
Adults who engage with students (bus drivers, cafeteria workers, office administrators, custodians, counselors, teachers, principals, parents) benefit from the time and supports to practice, learn about, and hone their own SEL skills. Providing these opportunities for all adults in the school community will benefit students as well as the broader school community.
3. **Engage a diverse group of stakeholders to analyze and interpret disaggregated data.**
To focus SEL programs on equity, it is critical to examine data by various student subgroups, as this provides a picture of how different students experience and perceive their school and educational experiences. These data can serve as a springboard to improve services for all students, deepen relationships with students, family, and staff, and develop solutions to individual student needs.
4. **Establish structures for students to co-design SEL programming.**
Developing equity-focused SEL programs involves students co-leading and co-designing. Students are the experts on themselves and best understand their own interests and experiences. Adults (educators, parents) can provide structures and supports that allow students to set inclusive norms, and lead the design of meaningful SEL experience.
5. **Foster partnerships with key organizations in the community to bridge in-school and out-of-school SEL.**
Learning is culturally based and thus equity-focused SEL incorporates families and communities into the design process to imagine what programs that boost community and individual well-being look like.

6. **Align SEL and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in system design, programs, and practices.**

Equity-focused SEL should be connected to other, system-level initiatives aimed at addressing barriers to and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion, all of which engage students in conversations about power and identity.

The characteristics and recommendations outlined by Hesterberg et al. (2012) are useful to support school districts, and communities with identifying equity-focused SEL programs, and offering guidance on how to develop these programs, as well as evaluate their impact.

What do programs need to consider to ensure they are addressing SEL through an educational equity lens?

To foster learning and development for all students, particularly those who have been historically impacted by structural inequities, programs need to be designed, implemented, and assessed with an equity lens.

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Equity considerations for program development and design.

When designing programs, developers may ask, is this program designed to effectively support the well-being of all students by allowing them to reflect, affirm, and sustain their cultural identities in the classroom? Some argue that the guiding frameworks of SEL may not adequately promote the well-being of diverse youth in inequitable societies ([Mahfouz and Anthony-Stevens, 2020](#)). Thus, program developers may draw upon the practices outlined above to ensure the program develops SEL competencies in culturally sustaining and socially just ways.

Equity considerations for program implementation.

Even if programs are designed to promote socially just and equitable SEL competencies for all children, they need to be implemented well to successfully improve behavioral, social, emotional, and academic outcomes for all children. Program implementation considerations include questions such as: Are SEL programs implemented equitably across different groups of students? Do students have equitable access to programs? and Who is participating in SEL programs? Additionally, for programs to be implemented with fidelity, the program implementers (often teachers and other educators) need SEL competencies and training in culturally responsive pedagogies and socially just approaches. Thus, program developers may need to invest time and resources into developing training programs and evaluating their effectiveness.

Equity considerations for the evaluation of program outcomes and effectiveness.

Even if SEL programs were not designed with an equity lens, program evaluation approaches and questions can center on how programs differentially affect different groups of students. Evaluations may focus on questions such as whether SEL programs effectively support the well-being of

underrepresented student groups by sufficiently reflecting, affirming, and sustaining their cultural identities in the classroom. Additionally, program evaluations may ask whether socially-just and culturally sustaining SEL programs help schools improve student social, behavioral, and academic outcomes.

Innovative Approaches to Equity-Focused Social Emotional Learning Programs

The **Education Innovation and Research (EIR)** program in the **Office of Elementary and Secondary Education** at the U.S Department of Education was established under section 4611 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). EIR provides funding to create, develop, implement, replicate, or take to scale entrepreneurial, evidence-based, field-initiated innovations to improve student achievement and attainment for high-need students; and rigorously evaluate such innovations. Through a competitive grant process, the EIR program is designed to generate and validate solutions to persistent education challenges and to support the expansion of those solutions to serve substantially larger numbers of students.

The EIR program is creating opportunities to develop, implement, and evaluate equity-focused SEL programs

Recognizing the importance of equity-focused SEL programs, EIR has made investments in funding programs that aim to develop, implement, and evaluate SEL programs that take an equitable education approach. Below, we highlight five EIR-funded, equity-focused SEL programs that are in various stages of design, implementation, and evaluation. While each program has a unique approach and components, they share considerations and characteristics that provide illustrative examples of how to design, implement, and evaluate high-quality equity-focused SEL programs. As exemplified below, each program adapts the six characteristics of high-quality equity-focused SEL programs, described by **Hesterberg et al. (2021)**, in community-focused and culturally relevant approaches and practices (**Ladson-Billings, 1995**).

Project Spotlight 1: Culturally Responsive, Embedded, Social and Emotional Learning in Alaska (CRESEL)

In 2015, the Association of Alaska School Boards saw opportunities to invest in novel approaches to better support students. Alaska's graduation rate was 71 percent, positioning it in the bottom five states, and Alaska Native students were leaving school at high rates partly due to the cross-cultural disconnect from being in culturally dissonant classrooms (**Balfanz et al., 2015**). Building students' persistence, motivation, and engagement in learning through SEL-based practices offered the potential to support academic outcomes. Yet, there was a complete lack of evidence for or approaches to SEL with indigenous students. Lori Grassgreen, Director of the CRESEL Initiative shared in an interview, "We wanted to support SEL but we knew that most of the curricula out there weren't necessarily a good fit for our communities and districts. So, when we were planning for the project, we tried to build the approach on the cultural standards that have been developed in our state and we used that to frame the key elements or structural pieces of the program." Thus, the **Culturally Responsive and Embedded Social and Emotional Learning (CRESEL)** approach was born.

CRESEL aimed to facilitate SEL practices and approaches that were congruent and engaged with the cultural value systems of Alaska natives by building on cultural knowledge and community values and experiences. "So often in Alaska, we adopt approaches from the lower 48 states that

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may or may not actually fit our communities” noted Heather Coulehan, Social and Emotional Learning Coordinator (shared in an interview). “CRESEL is the opportunity to design and share approaches that work for Alaskans, because Alaskan districts, schools, and communities are co-creating the model together.” CRESEL is not a project but rather an approach to or process for helping districts and schools develop SEL practices that are culturally responsive.

Capitalizing on **Alaska’s Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools**, a framework that was created collaboratively with Alaska Native associations and representatives, CRESEL adapted **CASEL’s SEL framework** and interpreted it for their rural, indigenous population.

To develop culturally responsive SEL, CRESEL’s holistic approach is multipronged. It involves (1) building an understanding in the entire community (elders, school leaders, parents, students) of the impacts of trauma on learning, (2) building positive school climates and strengthening caring relationships, (3) teaching CRESEL skills and using teaching practices that support CRESEL skill development in academic classes, (4) fostering partnerships and dialogues with the community to bridge in-school and out-of-school SEL, and (5) integrating CRESEL skills into positive behavior supports and other school/district infrastructures. But none of this can happen without first understanding community values, ideas, and goals. To do this, they begin by hosting **community dialogues** (or conversations) to define and co-create culturally responsive and embedded social emotional learning that is guided by the community and culture. An essential element to designing equitable SEL processes is to find a common ground between CASEL’s SEL skills and the skills valued in Alaska Native communities. “Our communities often already had ways of talking about SEL without ever calling it SEL. So, part of our job in this work was to find more middle ground about the way we were talking about these particular skills in a way that the community talks about them” explained Lori Grassgreen. “To be actually culturally responsive is to really adopt the language of the community themselves.” Shak’ shaani éesh, CRESEL’s Community Engagement Director, elaborated in an interview. “When we were beginning these community conversations and inviting them to our community dialogues, we spent time explaining what SEL is. And sometimes we come to the conclusion, oh it’s not like it hasn’t existed before, it’s just been called something else. So, identifying that word or those sets of words or that practice that’s already there and encouraging the school district to use that language instead and then there’s a sense of ownership by the community of that structure.”

CRESEL’s approach was piloted in 30 schools representing four Alaska Native cultures and language groups: Athabaskan, Tlingit, Inupiaq, and Yup’ik, and reached more than 1,800 K-12 students over the course of their grant. The CRESEL team will be the first to admit there are challenges when you take on something as important and ambitious as developing CRESEL. Turnover amongst leaders and teachers, and power dynamics rank amongst the most commonly voiced challenges. When recounting how they addressed power dynamics during community conversations, Shak’ shaani éesh explained “we try to eliminate the power

“We try to eliminate the power dynamics themselves, making sure that everyone there has experience, is a leader, and everyone’s voice is important.”

dynamics themselves, making sure that everyone there has experience, is a leader, and everyone's voice is important." They structure this in their meeting space by setting up chairs in a large circle to signify that everyone is a leader and is bringing valuable lived experiences to the dialogue. To address turnover and facilitate sustainability, the CRESEL team noted that it is critical to have SEL programs integrated within broader initiatives happening at the district and community level. For example, integrating CRESEL approaches into a school board strategic plan would create a unifying mechanism that could withstand transitions.

CRESEL has generated a **wealth of resources** and broad recommendations for teams aiming to develop CRESEL for their communities and contexts. For example, CRESEL has created a **Checklist for Culturally Responsive and Embedded SEL** which provides examples of actions, structures, practices, and approaches that may be used by districts and schools. They are separated into seven sections: Support, Respect, Teach, Practice, Model, Culture, and Reflection & Evaluation. The checklist lays out actionable steps, such as "establish district CRESEL planning and team and school-based CRESEL design team" within the Support section, and "review and analyze school climate & connectedness survey (SCCS) district level and school data" for the Respect section. Each step ensures that the district or school is getting closer to actualizing culturally responsive and embedded SEL. To facilitate culture change with individuals, district, and broader communities, and to support sustainability, CRESEL created a **Cultural Adaptation Process** guidance document. Cultural adaptation, a cornerstone of successful and scalable interventions, is "the systematic modification of an evidence-based treatment (or intervention protocol) to consider language, culture, and context in such a way that it is compatible with the client's cultural patterns, meaning, and values" (**Sit et al., 2020**). This document references Alaskan cultural standards and poses a series of guiding questions to support the integration of those standards into CRESEL practices, approaches, resources, and processes.

When asked to reflect upon their journey and offer broad recommendations for other teams, the team noted that who you hire to be a part of the project team is essential and sets the framing for the whole project. The CRESEL team recommends hiring staff who are already poised to be immersed in culturally responsive equity work. For CRESEL, they value people who prioritize relationship building and "regional orientation," a deep understanding of the history and culture of the region. Grassgreen highlighted that what they seek is an understanding "that the people that have lived on the lands here, have lived here for thousands and thousands of years and have a lot of ways of teaching and strengthening their young people." What this requires is a humbling of external leaders to put aside any notions of superior knowledge or experience, and enthusiasm for immersing themselves in the way of the community as a learner and a guest. CRESEL has found that the most impactful people are those who see opportunities and strengths rather than deficits. As Shak' shaani éesh noted, the important questions to ask are "what are things that already exist that we can tap into that have derived from the culture, their experience, and the impacts that history has had on these communities?" Identifying strengths is not only a shift in language, but also an amplification of the voices of cultural leaders who are already part of the school community. Coulehan encouraged "thinking about the people who work in the school from the community, like the front office staff or maintenance or the bilingual teachers. They are leaders. They are from the community, know the community, and so it's about putting structures in place that really recognize people and the leadership and knowledge that they bring."

CRESEL's approach was designed to be adaptable to the local needs of the community and district. To help communities design culturally responsive embedded SEL which can be scaled and sustained, the team developed a series of resources. For example, they created the Transforming Schools Framework, which is a trauma-engaged framework for Alaska. The framework draws upon new research on the impact of childhood trauma on learning and what practitioners can do to provide affected students with what they need to succeed rather than perpetuating the cycle of trauma. More recently, CRESEL authored a **milestones toolkit**. Functioning as part assessment and part checkoff list, it offers culturally responsive guidelines. "It's very Alaskanized," Lori Grassgreen shared. It doesn't offer a recipe, but rather highlights what is important and provides illustrative examples. For example, it describes how to build relationships and offers examples of what "integrating culture and community" actually looks like in the Alaskan context. Scaling these resources also allowed for peer consultation across the state collaborating and supporting each other through these resources.

Project Spotlight 2: Building Toward Computer Science Equity and Inclusion: Developing an Ecosystem of Supports

Orange County (OC), California represents a microcosm of the United States (US). The US is projected to become a majority-minority by 2044, while OC reached that milestone in 2004 (**Orange County Department of Education, 2020**). Recognizing both that their diversity is a major asset and that skills in technical and creative occupations, such as computer science, need to be cultivated in the future workforce to stay relevant and competitive, the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) has heavily invested in increasing enrollment and retention of female students and Latine students in computer science (CS) courses. To increase female and Latine students' computational thinking skills and CS-identity, the intervention includes three approaches: (1) build students' computational thinking skills through academic instruction focused on inclusive practices and culturally relevant teaching (**Ladson-Billings, 1995**); (2) build students' CS-inclusive identity through social emotional learning practices and exposure to role models; and (3) create an ecosystem of supports and school-wide CS-identity through communities of practice. The goal is to target 16 high schools in Orange County, CA that have 15 percent+ discrepancy between female students enrolled in CS and the district population, and/or 15 percent+ discrepancy between Latine students enrolled in CS and the district population, or both. It should reach approximately 32,000 students and 1,000 teachers.

The project's design is directly informed by the **California English Learner Roadmap** and **California's Multi-Tiered System of Support** (CA MTSS), an intervention framework that aligns academic, behavioral, and social-emotional learning in an integrated system of support for all students. The goal of CA MTSS is to close the equity gap through inclusive and equitable learning environments. Both design components emphasize culturally-relevant instruction and inclusive practices. Dr. Christine Olmstead (OCDE), Associate Superintendent of Educational Services, noted in an interview, that this approach ensures that the program fosters partnerships with organizations in the broader community and is aligned with broader SEL and DEI initiatives happening both in Orange County and California. "In the training that we will do with our teachers, we are making sure that they understand what culturally relevant pedagogy is." California has a **state framework** that outlines elements of culturally relevant pedagogies and practices. Olmstead explains that those elements serve as the basis for the design of their teaching training.

This teacher training is a central part of the project's success. It involves long-term professional development to build teachers' literacy around diversity, equity, and inclusion while at the same time helping adults develop their own SEL skills. Focusing on their own SEL skills in the context of equity

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conversations allows educators to see SEL and equity as an integral part of the student learning experience. In Orange County, these practices are modeled during professional development sessions. “Everything we do always starts with an engaging opening activity,” said Olmstead. “And then you do your content piece from there, and then we always close with optimistic closure. We make sure SEL is embedded into everything that we do, and we model that in our training. We actually break it down and talk to adult learners about —What

did you experience? How do you think that can be replicated in your own classroom? How do you think outcomes for students might be better? And so, we stop and ask those questions so they are related with their learning as adult learners and how it can actually be modeled with young learners.”

Probing equitable outcomes is a central goal of the project. Results will be examined by disaggregating data by gender and ethnicity to track the progress of these underrepresented groups. They aim to have a model that can be adopted by other districts and counties that want to implement an effective, equity-based CS system transformation.

While the project is just beginning its implementation, some pieces of advice Olmstead offered to other teams interested in equitable SEL programs is to start with **Universal Design for Learning** and embed SEL into the curriculum instead of sectioning it out as a stand-alone program. “We really focus in on the rationale as to why you need to make sure SEL is part of every period, every day, and not a standalone 20-minute exercise that another teacher does and nobody else has to do it. We really talk about the importance of SEL concepts and skills that kids need to know in order for them to be successful in every piece of their academic life, because those skills are transferable.” Olmstead recommends going back to “What engages you as a learner? What made you successful as a learner? What were those adult interactions that created a safe environment for you?” She recommends taking those experiences and interactions and ensuring that they happen in the teacher’s own classroom, contextualized for their students’ needs.

In addition to providing professional learning opportunities that allow educators to reflect upon their own SEL and equity education experiences, the program ensures that the material is culturally responsive for students. Olmstead described the “Know My Name, Face, and Story” approach to developing relationships with students. “Know My Name, Face, and Story” is a districtwide approach to highlighting, learning about, and honoring the people and stories of the OC community. Their professional development teaches educators to use this approach to get to know the name, face, and life experiences of each and every student. She noted that doing so is a challenge, as at the secondary level “you’ve got 175 kids coming out to you every day. That’s a lot of faces and a lot of stories to know, but it is the number one piece of your job as an educator to understand the background that your children come from, so you can provide the best education for them. And not just run them out of the system, but really create their K–12 environment to be a place of safety, a place of growth and learning so that they can be ready for college and career.”

Of course, this endeavor is not without challenges or barriers, many of which have been exacerbated by COVID-19, as the districts and schools that the project targeted (e.g., those with a 15 percent+ difference in the female or Latine students taking CS courses compared to the district average, or both), were differentially affected by COVID-19. For example, Santa Ana has a 76.8 percent Hispanic or Latino-identifying population while Newport Beach has an 8.8 percent Hispanic or Latino-

identifying population³. While Santa Ana's population is four times the size of Newport Beach, it has ten times the number of COVID-19 cases.⁴ "High-impact COVID districts were completely virtual all of last year, so trying to offer virtual training in the midst of trying to be virtual teachers was too much." Olmstead recounts. Following the return to in-person instruction this school year, their "focus has been on really going back to the basic needs of students and re-establishing what school looks like with in-person instruction."

The program has experienced other barriers, including teacher turnover mid-pandemic as well as rapidly transitioning all teacher training to virtual rather than in-person. When asked whether engaging teachers virtually was a challenge, Olmstead detailed how they have made concerted efforts to maximize engagement. "We don't struggle with virtual fatigue and I think the reason is that we really have our own staff focusing on **Universal Design for Learning** and **adult learning theory**." Program developers are applying these principles to their training. This results in teachers who "don't feel burned out." Instead of a lecture, the program uses breakout rooms to promote small group collaboration and many other tenets from the professional development and adult learning literatures. "For example, if you talk for 10 minutes, give teachers 2 minutes to process," Olmstead suggested. In essence, the program aims to apply everything that teachers should be doing with their own students. The training facilitators model that in their own training, illustrating how this program prioritizes professional development that is centered on developing educators' skills and capacities.

Project Spotlight 3: Using and Leveraging Technology to Reinvent Accessibility: Minecraft Mentor Edition (ULTRA-ME)

Duval County Public Schools in Florida is focusing on a group that is often overlooked in the diversity, equity, and inclusion narrative: students with disabilities (such as autism, dyslexia, ADHD, specific learning disabilities, behavior disabilities, and emotional disabilities). While students with disabilities perform better in inclusion classrooms with nondisabled students, teachers are not always well-prepared to teach classrooms with students of differing abilities (**Duval County Public Schools, 2020**). This lack of preparedness in serving students of differing abilities can lead to negative learning experiences for all students in the classroom (**Duval County Public Schools, 2020**). To serve all students in inclusive classrooms, ULTRA-ME is providing professional development and support to teachers using **Minecraft** as an instructional tool that is accessible and engaging for all students. Minecraft was specifically selected because of its use of coding and computer science, low cost, and benefit for high-need students with disabilities such as autism, dyslexia, ADHD, specific learning disabilities, and behavior/emotional disabilities. The project team hypothesizes that digital platforms feature interactive and multiple representations of a scientific system that enable active knowledge construction and learning through play and exploration. Further, the immersive augmented reality (AR) environment in Minecraft is expected to increase engagement and decrease distractions for students with disabilities and allow these students to engage in more collaborative work with their peers, which is hypothesized to improve their SEL skills (**Duval County Public Schools, 2020**). Through this project, ULTRA-ME aims to improve STEM and SEL skills for students in grades K–5 with a focus on students with disabilities. While ULTRA-ME has only recently begun designing and implementing their project, it is promising as an equitable SEL program that is inclusive of neurodiversity in students.

³The population estimate from July 1, 2019 was retrieved from the US Census Bureau.

⁴ COVID-19 cases are based on data retrieved on Oct 21, 2021 from the Orange County COVID-19 Dashboard.

Project Spotlight 4: RIPPLE: Reducing disparities and Implementing strategies to Promote Proactive Learning Environments

In **Iredell-Statesville School District** in North Carolina, student trauma is the most pressing issue in the community. For example, suicide is the second leading cause of death in North Carolina among ages 15–34 and the third leading cause of death among ages 10–14 (**Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019**). When trauma goes unresolved, it can lead to a series of outcomes that negatively impact individual academic achievement and the school culture as a whole. Traumatic events or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), increase a child’s likelihood of experiencing stress, depression, sadness, alienation, and anxiety (**Iredell-Statesville School District, 2019**). While school often serves as a refuge for students from the stresses of their home environment, there are significant challenges. For example, students who have been exposed to trauma often adopt sets of acting-out behaviors that violate school rules. This can lead to punitive measures, thus retraumatizing the student. Additionally, for the 24 percent of students who identify as racial minorities (**NCES, 2019**), identifying with their teachers can be challenging because 82 percent of K–12 teachers are White (**Iredell-Statesville School District, 2019**). This can make it difficult for students to let their guard down and seek support and resources at school.

RIPPLE aims to positively impact academic and behavioral outcomes for students by infusing novel **trauma-informed practices** into the district’s existing **Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)**, which helps educators provide academic and behavioral strategies for students with various needs. RIPPLE theorizes that infusing novel SEL-focused approaches into school culture, teachers’ practices, and classroom experiences will reshape school culture, staff, and systems and positively impact student academic achievement and behavioral outcomes. For example, through RIPPLE, middle and high schools (students, staff, and educators) will engage in a Restorative Justice training that refocuses disciplinary measures away from a punitive approach and towards prevention of misbehavior. The goals of this approach are to avoid retraumatizing the students and reduce instructional time lost to suspensions.

A central feature of their program is to provide professional learning (PL) for educators to develop awareness and understanding of the impact trauma has on student achievement and behaviors. This knowledge, in turn, will build educators’ capacity to recognize and implement a trauma-informed interventional approach for high-need students. “RIPPLE is designed to change the conversation in our schools from an approach that asks, ‘What’s wrong with you?’ to one that asks, ‘What happened to you?’” shared Jessica Smith, Project Director

of RIPPLE during an interview. RIPPLE’s culturally responsive PL opportunities are designed to raise consciousness and change behavior, integrating issues of race, ethnicity, and culture to make the SEL program more culturally congruent for their diverse student population. This includes creating content that is relevant to student lives, accommodating different home languages, and using teaching methods that are culturally familiar to students. The program is informed by the belief that teachers who gain SEL skills and competencies for themselves, will be better equipped to recognize and support students’ emotions, as well as manage their own feelings of burnout.

“RIPPLE is designed to change the conversation in our schools from an approach that asks, ‘What’s wrong with you?’ to one that asks, ‘What happened to you?’”

“As a district, we have a really strong system for examining our data and making our needs-based decisions based on the data as well as stakeholder feedback.”

Some parents have questioned the value of spending time on SEL in school. To guide their approach and address these concerns, RIPPLE engages multiple stakeholders in decision making based on data. “As a district, we have a really strong system for examining our data and making our needs-based decisions based on the data as well as stakeholder feedback,” Smith noted. When considering where and how to implement their programs, RIPPLE discusses student outcomes (for example, academic performance and suspension

rates) with teachers, principals, and the community. Together, the district and community jointly decide on where and how to implement trauma-informed approaches.

RIPPLE’s programmatic approach and community partnerships were truly put to the test in March of 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly shifted the educational landscape. At the beginning of the pandemic, RIPPLE immediately dispatched social workers to distribute Wi-Fi hotspots and devices to students who lacked access to virtual learning. Access to devices and the internet allowed students to receive stable social-emotional support twice a week through Restorative Justice proactive circles designed to build culture and community. An example of RIPPLE’s integrative approach to providing trauma-informed SEL services can be seen in their response to access to mental health services during COVID-19. During the pandemic, many families were unable to provide transportation to mental health services even if they received a referral for their child. “We have a partnership with a mental health organization, and we’ve got parents that are working or parents that can’t be present for whatever reason, so we’re bringing services to them,” said Smith. They dispatched mental health providers to meet students with referrals in front of their homes. By fully integrating equity initiatives into its **Trauma-Informed Care** program, RIPPLE is able to support all students, including their highest risk students, during the pandemic, which for many students would be one of the most traumatic events of their generation.

Project Spotlight 5: Scaling STARR (Supporting Teachers in Alaska’s Remote/Rural Regions): A Systems Approach to Mentoring New Teachers

As elaborated upon in the **CRESEL** project description, K–12 schools in Alaska face two key challenges. One is high teacher turnover, which can undermine student achievement and create significant financial challenges for districts (**Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond, 2017**). The other is a cross-cultural disconnect between teachers and students (**University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2020**). Almost 80 percent of early-career teachers in Alaska are from out of state and do not have experience working with Alaska Native communities that make up the majority of their student populations (**University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2020**). Therefore, the **Alaska Statewide Mentor Project** has provided in-person mentoring services to early-career teachers for the past 16 years, supporting them through the challenges of being a new teacher in Alaska, as well as the development of cultural competence—an understanding of the culture, world view, and ways of learning of the Alaska Native community. These transformative, in-person mentorship opportunities have limited reach into rural, remote communities—82 percent of which are only accessible by plane or boat—where the need is arguably the greatest (**University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2020**). The STARR project is implementing a virtual mentoring model that would allow for early-career teachers

in rural, remote schools to receive the mentorship needed to feel supported and facilitate SEL skills in their students through culturally responsive teaching practices. There is great potential in STARR's teacher cultural competence model to facilitate students' social emotional wellbeing and align the classroom to a culturally sensitive space that is respectful to the local community and reflective of their values, norms, and heritage.

Where do we go from here?

Equity-focused social emotional learning is imperative in our society today. The promise of SEL is achieved with a focus on educational equity, and equity in education can only be achieved through culturally responsive and contextualized SEL. Without equity-focused policies, mindset, and programs, biases (whether implicit or explicit and at the individual, educator, school, district, state, or society level) will "continue to unfairly and unjustly marginalize some students" (Duchesneau, 2020). SEL provides a lens to ask essential questions such as, do all students have opportunities to thrive? Do all students feel a sense of belonging in their educational environment and feel culturally represented, valued, and heard? Recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach to SEL will foster educational inequity, districts, schools, educators, and communities around the country are hard at work developing, implementing, and evaluating culturally responsive, equity-focused SEL programs to support the needs, values, and voices of all students.

"The promise of SEL is achieved with a focus on educational equity, and equity in education can only be achieved through culturally responsive and contextualized SEL."

Additional Equity–Focused SEL Resources:

Equity and SEL - Casel School guide

CASEL

Infographic: Integrating a Focus on Equity into Social and Emotional Learning

Regional Educational Laboratory Program Midwest

Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Through an Equity Lens

Ed Trust

Connecting SEL and Equity in Hybrid Learning Classrooms

Edutopia

Transformative SEL

CASEL

Social Emotional Learning and Equity — National Equity Project

National Equity Project

Policy Brief: SEL and Racial Equity – SEL Center

West Ed

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